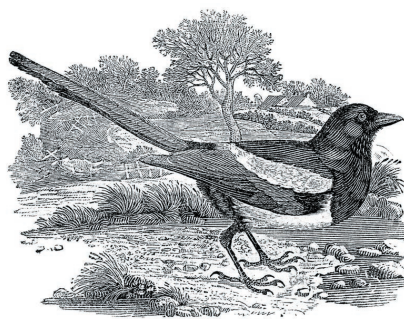


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MIRA NAIR AT THE BAZAAR:
SELLING THE EXOTIC EROTIC IN *KAMA SUTRA*

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Since the release of the film *Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love* in 1996, critics have almost unanimously accused diasporic Indian filmmaker Mira Nair of marketing India for western audiences. The general tone of the heavy criticism the film has received is put forth by Roger Ebert when he bluntly states that “[n]othing in [Nair’s] previous work [...] prepared [him] for this exercise in exotic eroticism.” This essay is divided between two closely related arguments. In the first half I argue that *Kama Sutra* capitalises on the crossover appeal of the exotic and the focus rests on the increasing visibility of the exotic within globalised cultural industries (of which a fascination with South Asian culture is part and parcel of), most often through the circulation of highly marketable commodities such as Nair’s film. In the second half of the essay I suggest that the film illuminates how contemporary postcolonial cultural discourses articulate gendered forms of social regulation and normalisation; in fact, the orientalisising frame within which *Kama Sutra* is received is built on the stereotypical association of India with the feminised erotic tale. In sum, while addressing aspects of re-orientalist representations in Nair’s film, this essay traces the connection between the exotic and the feminised that runs through the film, in particular through well-demarcated lines of orientalist desire.

According to current criticism, the rise of the New-York based Indian filmmaker Nair to caterer of exoticism for western consumption is, as Laura Marks puts it, “but one example of how the commercialization of cultural hybridity tends to evacuate its critical effects” (4). In her account of intercultural cinema, Marks draws on works such as Nair’s to argue that filmmaking coming from cultural minorities living in western metropolitan centres evokes “memories both individual and cultural, through an appeal to

nonvisual knowledge, embodied knowledge, and experiences of the senses, such as touch, smell, and taste" (2). Indeed, *Kama Sutra* comes across as one of Nair's most sensuous and sumptuously visual films, making the most of a carefully crafted photography. In keeping with Marks's analysis, when interviewed in 2000 by the on-line Indian magazine *Tehelka*, Nair stated: "I felt that the film is very kamasutric [...] in the philosophical way of engaging your senses. It's a very sensual experience. I don't mean in the sexual sense - I mean it engages all your senses, visually, orally, musically, and aesthetically it was really what I wanted" (qtd. in Rajan 63). Marks exemplifies an anxiety over the relinquishing of intercultural cinema's critical potentials as difference becomes incorporated into the logic of late global capitalism by drawing her attention to *Kama Sutra*, almost echoing Nair's words in the interview to *Tehelka*:

[...] in large and violent dislocations caused by colonialism and exile, it is especially disingenuous to try to offer up the sensuous experience of the homeland on a plate. Mira Nair might represent a mythical and richly sensuous India in *Kama Sutra* [...], but the film's kaleidoscope of gleaming bodies, saturated colors, trails of incense, and accented English seems to pander to Western wet dreams rather than appeal to the emigrant's longing for the homeland. (232).

This orientation towards the West has been persistently noted by film commentators as blatant self-exoticisation, or re-orientalisation, verging on appeals to voyeuristic delight. For instance, Sunil Sreedharan writing for *IndiaStar*, a magazine catering to the Indian diaspora, declares: "What was disappointing to me about *Kama Sutra* was that this movie appeared to be aimed squarely at the Western audience in its exoticizing of Vatsyayana's turgid and tedious compilation of the sexual mores of classical India." Along these lines, the article "Lessons of Love," published in *India Currents* by the time of the film's release, refers to those viewers and critics "who question whether Nair herself has not cashed in on the Western perception of the ancient scholarly treatise on sex as a mail-order catalog of esoteric sexual delights." The filmmaker declared to Jennie Yabroff that she was after "an anti-exotic film," but how can its settings, costumes and art direction come off as anything but exotic? If she admitted in the article in *India Currents* to being "quite aware of the burden of the title," why does she deploy in it the very words *Kama Sutra* that in the western *imaginaire* stand in for exotic sex and India? On the basis of such reading, how can we begin to explain the play on re-orientalist representations of India as the exotic other in *Kama Sutra*? Part of the answer lies in the sinuous workings of the global cultural industries, in which the fashioning of India or Indo-chic trend (inspired by Madonna and Gwen Stefani's "Indian" period) functions as a powerful and profit-making trend in late-capitalist consumer culture.

Saadia Toor, in an article on Indo-chic and the cultural politics of consumption in post-liberalisation India, reads the phenomenon of Indo-chic as a subtext to Nair's film and accuses the filmmaker of self-orientalising gestures in her return to India: "Indians (both within and outside of India) are increasingly the ones turning the Orientalist gaze back upon India, almost as if looking at themselves through 'Western Eyes', leading to a cultural cannibalism of sorts" (20). Contrary to current criticism, Alpana Sharma proposes that *Kama Sutra*'s narrative introduces alternative modes of resistance to such appropriation by western consumption. She argues that, "[g]iven that the history of the exotic itself has come to inform what we know about India's erotic past, the exotic must be taken seriously in order, finally, to be dispensed with as an inadequate means of representation" (101). In Sharma's view, this accounts for the difference between the exotic in Nair's film and the exotic as a mere fetishistic and essentialist colonial construction. Thus, when Toor refers to *Kama Sutra* as a "movie which, almost too obviously, plays on [an] Orientalist discourse and its attendant stereotypes of India" (11), she also seems to notice in the film what Graham Huggan would call a strategic exoticism – the process whereby "in a postcolonial context, exoticism is effectively *repoliticised*, redeployed both to unsettle metropolitan expectations of cultural otherness and to effect a grounded critique of differential relations of power" (ix-x).

Taking my cue from Sharma, but without fully endorsing her celebrative and recuperative tone, and following Huggan, I might suggest, for argument's sake, that while Nair has indeed capitalised on the exotic appeal of her film, she has equally succeeded in sustaining a critique of exoticism by appropriating exoticist codes of cultural representation. This writing back achieved within neo-colonial market forces could be attained through strategies of cultivated exhibitionism, similar to the ones used by Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. According to Huggan, this self-conscious use of exoticist procedures works to expose the fallacy behind exotic India and can be translated into, for instance in *Kama Sutra*, the deliberately melodramatic grouping of Indian romance and political intrigue, and the emotional staging of a sad tale of love. However, does Nair manage to present in *Kama Sutra* a meta-exoticism, that is, a strategic redeployment of the exotic? Alternatively, why must we assume that writing back on the face of metropolitan economic dominance is, after all, what the filmmaker is after? On another level, still, participation in the spectacle, understood in a Debordian fashion as a social relationship between people that is mediated by representations, does not imply passivity on the part of viewers. In effect, why should we assume the viewer to be a passive node in this process? Can't we envision that the viewer might sense a participation in the power structures sketched out by the film and certain uneasiness? Are

not the viewers even slightly aware that a cosmopolitan connoisseurship of world cinema is symptomatic of cultural capital and social distinction?

These questions take us into the issue of the burden of representation – a predicament “whereby the artistic discourse of hitherto marginalized subjects is circumscribed by the assumption that such artists speak as ‘representatives’ of the communities from which they come” (Mercer 214) – which is closely connected to the heavy criticism Nair has received from those who felt she steered clear of the responsible politics of representation of race and ethnicity that was expected of her. For instance, in Gita Rajan’s words, Nair seems “governed more by market forces and commercial contingencies than by anticolonial, aesthetic ones” (54). From the outset, institutional support – *Kama Sutra* was originally produced by Channel 4 in the UK – created expectations that the film would speak against dominant discourses and would “speak for the margins.” Diasporic filmmakers frequently occupy the position of mediators, under the guise of native informants or cultural insiders, but Sharma defends Nair against political agendas as being “not simply a mouthpiece for her time and generation, reduced and answerable only to the exigencies of her historical moment” (97). Sharma’s opinion runs counter to general criticism, when she defends her against expectations of correcting representational inequalities by replacing stereotypes. These expectations, the critic argues, have led to the controversy over Nair’s films and, while this is true, I would also add that they reflect how the binary logic of dominant discourses continues to affect postcolonial representation.

At this juncture, I will try to further elucidate the questions I have been addressing by referring to the connection between the exotic and the erotic, in particular, to the ways in which, through spectacle, representations of Indian bodies come to be circulated as exotic commodities. Writing a couple of years after the film’s release, Ratna Kapur in the essay “‘A Love Song to Our Mongrel Selves’: Hybridity, Sexuality and the Law” (1999) examines the importance of recuperating and theorising desire as an important political project within postcolonial India. She posits that sexuality and culture have been inextricably bound as a result of the nineteenth-century colonial encounter and nationalist resistance, which resulted in a recasting by Indian nationalists of women and the private sphere of family and home as a space of pure Indian culture uncontaminated by the colonial encounter. Kapur draws our attention to the fact that this contention of sexuality as an untarnished space was resurfacing in Indian culture and, as a consequence, the representation of sexual pleasure was becoming a site of strong political conflict, which accounted for the difficulties Nair faced with the Central Board Of Film Certification when she attempted to release *Kama Sutra* in India, being forced into court battles over ordered cuts. Nair, in several interviews given to Indian and diasporic

magazines, recurrently described the film as feminist in its depiction of sexual politics. In fact, in a strategy that is half social activism and half publicity stunt, she made it a contractual condition in the distribution deal for India to have special women-only screenings three times a week.

Sharma terms as “Nair’s politics of provocation” the performance of transgressive acts Kapur deems vital for the postcolonial project in India. This subversive performance, Sharma writes, “takes as its site the spectacle of the body as its excesses of pleasure and pain call attention to the social codes of normativity at the same time as these codes are transgressed” (96). However, Rajan looks at the filmmaker’s work differently. In her essay addressing the construction of female bodies in Nair’s films she discerns major continuities between older forms of imperial exoticist representation of the female body and the work by some diasporic film directors. Rajan brings up many of the issues I merely sketch within this essay, including the construction of orientalist desire throughout *Kama Sutra*. The critic concludes that feminine sexuality can be merchandised even by enlightened, cosmopolitan postcolonial women, and she wonders why Nair is “enmeshed in antiquated, orientaling modes, and why she continues to deploy colonial stereotypes as late as 1997” (51). To reinforce Rajan’s point about the portrayal of women’s bodies as objects of mere desire in *Kama Sutra*, I would argue that the transgressive approach of the film reaches its own limit when it sets up a heterosexual register. Jigna Desai has already suggested that heteronormativity is determinant to the success of Nair’s films (33). It is precisely the evacuation of lesbian desire and non-heteronormativities that enables a heterosexual feminist subject to come into being in *Kama Sutra*. Indeed, by drawing attention to areas such as the heteropatriarchal control of sexuality and the obstacles to class mobility, Nair’s so-called politics of provocation is limited to contesting the representation of Indian and diasporic women as submissive victims of patriarchy.

To conclude, in the context of the appropriation of difference within the global cultural industries, it could be argued that, on the one hand, the representation of female desire for women as secondary and, on the other, the selection of the exotic title *Kama Sutra* to trade in the female body via stereotypical images discloses Nair’s failure to repoliticise identifiable orientalist imagery thus resulting in its re-orientalisation. Indisputably, the image of the East as a site of eroticism and sexual indulgence has had a lengthy history and continues to be part of the stock of cosmopolitan pleasures of the global cultural industries betraying a fascination with the exotic, and often erotic, allure of non-western cultures. In line with this larger trend, a disruptive and radical subtext – lesbian desire – is unexplored and left unquestioned and that undermines the redeployment of orientalist narratives in this re-turning of Nair’s camera to her homeland. Thus, the argument with which I would

like to conclude is twofold: a) by appropriating Vatsayana's *Kama Sutra*, the filmmaker indexes the colonial history by which erotic expressions of Indian sexuality were censored, rerouted, domesticated, or otherwise exoticised (Sharma 101); and, consequently b) Nair does not counter representations of an imagined India which profit from clichés of exotic heterosexual romance (Huggan 80).

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